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SUBJECT: D/NIO BRIEFS NATO ALLIES ON STATE OF PLAY IN
PAKISTAN

Classified By: DCM Richard G. Olson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (S) SUMMARY: On 18 January, John Dister, the Deputy National Intelligence Officer for South Asia, briefed NATO PermReps in a Secretary General's (SYG) Coffee format. Mr. Dister's presentation focused on three themes requested by the SYG: Pakistan stability; Pakistan's impact on Afghanistan; and overall Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. According to Dister, the Pakistani government faces an unparalleled terrorism threat from Al-Qaida and allied militant groups, but these groups' increased operational tempo in Pakistan has not yet had a major impact on the security situation in Afghanistan. He highlighted recent positive developments in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. NOTE: Mr. Dister's presentation was cleared for the purpose of an oral briefing only. END SUMMARY.

PAKISTAN STABILITY

12. (S) Mr. Dister briefed that Al-Qaida and tribal allies are more inclined to attack the government and its institutions than in past. This aggressive posture has become more noticeable since the Red Mosque siege in July 07. He went on to say that the role of Baitullah Massoud as an effective leader in the Taliban is not to be underestimated as he is expanding his base of support. Although the Pakistani military has been aggressive in some operations, it needs to make a commitment to developing a counter-insurgency capability.

PAKISTAN'S IMPACT ON AFGHANISTAN

13. (S) Some Afghan militants are now going to Pakistan to fight there, according to Mr. Dister, while some Pakistan operations have pushed refugees into Afghanistan, but overall, the impact of this cross-border movement is not large. Dister stressed that now is the time to impress upon Musharraf that the threat from Al-Qaida is a threat to his vision of a modern Pakistan, and that between political stability and counterterrorism success, the situation cannot be viewed in terms of trade-offs. Recent developments, such as new leadership in the Army, (eg. Chief Of Staff Kayani),

and the fact that the Governor of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), who favored accommodation with militants, has resigned, are positive indications that Pakistan could adopt a more consistent policy of military pressure.

PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

¶4. (S) Since the summer, a big improvement has been seen in overall relations, observed Dister. President Musharraf is saying the "right things," and COS Kayani recognizes the importance of military-military relations with Pakistan's western neighbor.

THEMES IN QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH PERMREPS

¶5. (S) Regarding the loyalty and professionalism of Pakistan security services, both the Army and the Directorate for Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) follow the President's orders, Mr. Dister pointed out, citing the example of the ISI's immediate shutdown of Kashmir operations in 2006. On Afghanistan, the ISI's policy is different, but its loyalties are with the government and it's still responsive to the Government. So, Dister concluded, when the ISI supports the Taliban, one can assume it is acting on GOP orders. He noted the huge anxiety in Pakistan leadership circles that US/NATO will pull out of Afghanistan in the near future, leaving chaos, thus causing the ISI to maintain links with Taliban as a hedge. Also, the existential fear of Indian meddling in Afghanistan makes the ISI reluctant to cut all ties with the Taliban. Mr. Dister answered one question in stating that penetration of the security forces is a problem, that the Pakistanis are aware of it, and are taking countermeasures.

POLITICS

¶6. (S) It is very important that elections be perceived as free and fair, said Dister, though he expects that they will be violent. The major crises in Pakistan history - 1971 war, Zia coup) were triggered by flawed elections, he went on to say. The opposition needs to also understand the perilous nature of the situation.

BORDERS

¶7. (S) Because of the difficult terrain and its low level of popular support in the area, it is much more difficult for security services to operate in North and South Waziristan than in NWFP areas north of Peshawar. The Pakistan Army is disciplined, but not good at counter-insurgency; company grade officers carry out orders, but don't know commanders intent, and demonstrate no flexibility. Communications between ground forces and the air force are lacking.

AL-QAIDA VS. TALIBAN

¶8. (s) Mr. Dister reported that there are some tensions between the two groups stemming from fact that the Taliban have their own &positive8 vision for Afghanistan, whereas Al-Qaida simply wants a place from which to operate. On foreign funding for these groups, Dister said that specifics are not available, but funding does come from the Gulf. The Saudis have expressed concern about Pakistan, "but we will see if that translates into action against financing networks," he said. The Pakistan military is too overstretched to undertake operations in Quetta, where there is an extensive concentration of Taliban leaders, for what would be marginal gain from their perspective, (since they wish to preserve the Taliban as a hedge, as noted above).

NUCLEAR FORCES

¶9. (S) Although security is fairly good, militants are very determined to get access and the safety of the Pakistan's nuclear arsenal cannot be taken for granted.

OTHER ISSUES

¶10. (S) When asked to hypothesize what the fallout would be if President Musharraf were to be assassinated, Dister replied the consequences would be quite dire and serious. Although there are succession procedures in place, and Pakistan would not fall apart, such a tragedy would be perceived as a huge win for Al-Qaida and terrorism. In that vein, he theorized that the upcoming elections could be a target for attack, but there are no such indications right now. He said that it is plausible that militants envision interrupting the electoral process as another way to erode confidence in the government.

¶11. (S) COMMENT: From the number and sophistication of questions, it is clear that PermReps not only were interested in the briefing but had solicited input from capitals on key questions. Many expressed the view that such briefings should be done on a regular basis. There is clearly a market here for briefings of this sort, and for intelligence at the REL NATO level. END COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) Mission greatly appreciates the NIC making Mr. Dister available on short notice in response to a request from Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer, (who will meet President Musharraf on Monday). The briefing went a long way toward ensuring that the transatlantic dialogue on Pakistan is conducted on the basis of solid and shared information.

NULAND